
MEDICAL EXAMINER ACTIVITY

The staff members of the Medical Examiner's Office are involved in a wide variety of activities commensurate with the mission of the office including responding to and investigating the scene of death, performing postmortem examinations, certifying the cause and manner of death, and providing information and assistance to families. Investigators, who are familiar with the emotional trauma of an unexpected death, communicate directly with the family as do the Medical Examiner pathologists, who review their findings with the families in order to clarify the many questions that accompany a sudden loss of life. The office also provides referrals to grief support services.

Many cases brought to the Medical Examiner's Office are dealt with in a routine manner. That is, the identity of the deceased is known, and the next-of-kin can be readily contacted to decide on final arrangements for the deceased and disposition of property associated with the scene of death. However, there are frequent cases that are difficult to resolve. In these deaths, at least one of the items above is missing or very difficult to establish. Identification of deceased may require tracing of dental, medical or police records. Some individuals may have died leaving no next-of-kin or next-of-kin far removed. Ensuring that all leads have been exhausted in pursuit of next-of-kin can be a very time consuming but ultimately rewarding effort.

The postmortem examination on each decedent includes the preservation of various body fluids and tissues for microscopic and toxicologic analysis. Photographs are taken of the external and internal portions of the examination, which are available for review at a later date if needed. Photographic documentation is also an essential item in those cases where the pathologist must provide court testimony. Forensic anthropology is another important activity necessary to resolve skeletal cases and difficult identification issues.

Medical Examiner pathologists and investigators provide testimony in court and at depositions. Staff participates in meetings with police, medical professionals, and attorneys. A recent addition to the duties of the Chief Medical Examiner is expert medical consultation and testimony in cases involving nonfatal domestic violence assaults.

Autopsy reports and related data from individual investigations are provided to agencies such as Police and Labor & Industries, to prosecuting attorneys, and to other agencies including the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Consumer Product Safety Commission. Reports on drug caused deaths are sent to the Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN).

Medical Examiner investigations require frequent contact between the Medical Examiner's Office and various media personnel. Staff are skilled in responding to the media inquiries that occur daily. The Medical Examiner pathologists and other staff participate in a variety of medical conferences, and provide information on a regular basis to law enforcement and medical personnel on various aspects of the role and function of the Medical Examiner's Office.

The data collected and presented in this and other Medical Examiner annual reports also provide baseline information for further analysis. Medical Examiner staff analyzes data to study relevant death investigation topics that have applications in such fields as law enforcement, medicine, law, social sciences, and injury prevention. Examples include infant mortality, teenage suicide, child abuse, law enforcement restraint, investigation of vehicular traffic accidents, and investigation of therapeutic complication deaths. In addition, the Office participates in teaching medical students, pathology residents, emergency medical service, and law enforcement personnel.

In 2001, staff participated as speakers at universities, conferences, and training seminars for law enforcement, medical, legal, and social service personnel in the following presentations and lectures:

Richard Harruff, MD, PhD:

SERVICE

- King County Child Death Review Team
- King County Domestic Violence Fatality Review
- Washington State Child Death Review Committee
- King County Inquest Procedures Review Committee
- King County Prosecuting Attorney's Elder Abuse Project
- Death Certificate Review Team, Washington State Department of Health
- SIDS Foundation of Washington, Executive Board
- DMORT Response Team, Pennsylvania, September

PRESENTATIONS

- "Role of the Medical Examiner in Homicide Investigation"
Training for Deputy Prosecuting Attorneys
King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, January 20, Seattle, WA
- "Forensic Pathology and the Medical Examiner"
Winter Opportunities Session
University Preparatory Academy, February 8, Seattle, WA
- "Investigation of Traffic Fatalities" and "Investigation of Infant Deaths"
Medicolegal Death Investigator Training Course
Port Angeles, WA, March 15; Ephrata, WA, April 19
- "Sudden Infant Death Syndrome"

North Central Region Emergency Medicine and Acute Care Conference
Wenatchee Convention Center, March 17, Wenatchee, WA

- “Pattern Injuries”
Core Training for Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners
Center for Urban Horticulture, March 19, Seattle, WA
- “Infant Death Investigation”
Ninth Annual Children's Justice Conference
Washington State Convention and Trade Center, March 27, Seattle, WA
- “Crime Scene Investigation at the Scene and in the Emergency Department”
WAMI 2001: Current Practices in Adult and Pediatric Trauma
Seattle Marriott Sea-Tac Airport Hotel, April 9, Seattle, WA
- “Injury Identification”
Evidence Collection and the Crime Scene: Emphasis on Domestic Violence
and Sexual Assault Crimes
Bellevue Public Safety Training Center, April 25 and May 8, Bellevue, WA
University of Washington, May 28, Seattle, WA
City of Kent Police/Fire Training Center, May 8, Kent, WA
- “Pattern Injuries and Strangulation”
Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress
Acute Care Conference, May 17, Yakima, WA
- “Automobile Accident Reconstruction” and “Infant Deaths”
Medicolegal Investigation of Death Course, Certificate Program in Forensics
University of Washington, May 21, Seattle, WA
- “Vehicle Fatalities and Injuries, Restrained and Non-restrained”
3-FLAGS Spokesperson Training, Washington Traffic Safety Commission
Embassy Suites Hotel, June 1, Bellevue, WA
- “Two Decade Review of Female Homicide Victims in King County, Washington”
Melissa K. Li and Richard C. Harruff
National Association of Medical Examiners Annual Meeting, October 15
Richmond, VA
- “Unexpected Hazard of Illegal Immigration: Outbreak of Viral Myocarditis Exacerbated by
Confinement and Deprivation in a Shipboard Cargo Container”
Melissa K. Li and Richard C. Harruff
National Association of Medical Examiners Annual Meeting, October 16
Richmond, VA
- “Strangulation Injuries in Intimate Partner Violence”
American Association of Critical Care Nurses, Puget Sound Chapter
Currents: Critical Care Symposium 2001
Meydenbauer Center, October 23, Bellevue, WA
- “Pattern Injuries and Strangulation”
Core Training For Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners
University of Washington Waterfront Activity Center, October 24, Seattle, WA

- “Strangulation Injuries in Intimate Partner Violence”
Washington State Emergency Nurses Association Symposium
Overlake Hospital Medical Center, November 7, Bellevue, WA
- “Duties of the Medical Examiner and Classification of Injuries”
Forensic Science Class
Overlake School, December 6, Redmond, WA

Al Noriega

- “Role of the King County Medical Examiner”
Presentation to the Seattle Police Community Services Officers
Seattle, WA. April 23, 2001.
- “Role of the King County Medical Examiner”
Presentation to the Seattle Police Community Services Officers
Seattle, WA. October 8, 2001.

Table 12-1 **Weekly Variation of Deaths Investigated by the King County Medical Examiner's Office**

	TOTAL
Number of weeks studied	52
Mean number of cases assumed	30.35
Maximum in any one week	41
Minimum in any one week	15

Table 12-2 **Weekly Variation of Autopsies Performed by the King County Medical Examiner's Office**

	TOTAL
Number of weeks studied	52
Mean number of autopsies	21.83
Maximum in any one week	38
Minimum in any one week	12

Organization of the King County Medical Examiner Division 2001

